



**Testimony by Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR, President and CEO, The Cultural Landscape Foundation, at the National Capital Planning Commission hearing on December 3, 2020.**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon.

The Cultural Landscape Foundation's involvement with the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden dates to 2015 and it is documented in our written comments that are included among the Section 106 letters posted on NCPD's website in advance of today's meeting.

It's important to note that the Modernist museum building and sculpture garden are unified through a common minimalist design vocabulary, shared materiality in the use of aggregate concrete, and visual and spatial continuity (for example, the garden's seminal, character-defining central rectangular pool has a direct relationship with the singular rectangular window that faces out on to the National Mall). The integrity of those key original 1974 design elements by architect Gordon Bunshaft were retained as part of a subsequent 1981 overlay of the Sculpture Garden by landscape architect Lester Collins.

The Cultural Landscape Foundation is very supportive of efforts by the Hirshhorn's leadership to rehabilitate the Sculpture Garden, especially to deal with unsightly decay and infrastructure failures. Moreover, we applaud the programmatic ambition.

However, the imposition of stacked stone walls, a discordant design element, and consequential alterations to the reflecting pool and pool area will damage this carefully calibrated artistic ensemble. As we wrote in our [June 12, 2020 Section 106 comments](#), adverse effects to the Sculpture Garden's central core, inclusive of the reflecting pool and the inner partition wall, should be avoided.

At the June 6, 2019, NCPD hearing, Hirshhorn director Melissa Chiu, responding to a question about the use of stacked stone walls on the inner partition wall, [stated](#): "I think that the way that we're thinking of the stone walls, that [Hiroshi] Sugimoto has kind of developed something of an expertise right now because **he's been doing these stone walls in a number of different architectural projects, especially in Japan, is that they're like his curatorial intervention**, if you like (emphasis added)."

This is both revealing and troubling, as director Chiu suggests that Mr. Sugimoto's concept does not grow organically from the unique minimalist Bunshaft and Collins design, but rather it is being forced onto the Sculpture Garden.

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden complex is part of the National Mall Historic District and eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. In addition to its historic significance, we also believe the complex is a work of art and it has been called the

largest work of art in the Smithsonian's collection. In fact, in a November 4, 1989, article [Washington Post architecture critic Ben Forgey](#) dubbed it, "the biggest piece of abstract art in town." The [Hirshhorn's website](#) says: 'Bunshaft conceived the Hirshhorn as "a large piece of functional sculpture"'; Bunshaft, when asked to describe the Hirshhorn, said it was "sculpture." More recently, at the October 7, 2020, Section 106 meeting, Andrew Lewis with the D.C. Historic Preservation Office said the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden is "an important work of art."

We agree.

This is not a novel concept. No less than Robert A.M. Stern, dean of the Yale School of Architecture, in a [November 9, 2014, New York Times article](#) about a planned expansion by the Frick Collection in New York City that would have destroyed their viewing garden by the influential postwar British landscape architect Russell Page, stated unequivocally: "Gardens are works of art."

However, as noted in our October 19, 2020, article ["But is it Art? Evasive Responses from Hirshhorn Officials about the Sculpture Garden Redesign"](#), when Hirshhorn director Chiu and associate curator Anne Reeve were asked at the October 7, 2020 Section 106 meeting whether the Sculpture Garden is a work of art they either couldn't or wouldn't answer the question. Instead, Ms. Chiu responded, "I don't think it's about my own opinion on this," while Ms. Reeve said, "I think we could go back and forth on nomenclature, you know, for, for, forever."

We believe the opinions of senior Hirshhorn officials about whether the Sculpture Garden is a work of art are central to their stewardship and decision-making about the Sculpture Garden's proposed redesign by Hiroshi Sugimoto. Indeed, Hirshhorn officials have said they don't want to compromise the artist's vision, the artist being Mr. Sugimoto. But what about the artistic vision of Bunshaft and Collins? If the Hirshhorn's leadership – and I'm pleased there are members of the Hirshhorn's Board present today – if the Hirshhorn's leadership does not consider landscape architecture to be an art form and their Sculpture Garden a work of art, they should explain why. If they do consider it art, then how does that square with the negative impacts of the design decisions they advocate? **If they don't know, do they not have a professional and ethical obligation to make that determination before executing a plan** that would have long-term ramifications?

Thank you.